

Watching the Big Parade

By RALPH MATTHEWS

IN DEFENSE OF THE EASTERN SHORE

The more I visit the Eastern Shore and observe the actions and reactions of its simple-minded natives, the more convinced I am that we have been entirely too harsh in our dealings with them.

When I returned from the lynching scene of Matthew Williams at Salisbury, I was bitter. I expressed this bitterness in both rhyme and prose. I denounced the red-necks of the sector as heathens unfit to associate with swine. All this is changed now. I believe they ARE fit to associate with swine. I confess that, in this particular, I was in error.

The trial of George Davis at Elkton Tuesday convinced me that we were all wrong about the Eastern Shore. We should not condemn them so much for the lynching of one victim, but should commend them highly for their restraint and good breeding in not having lynched more.

A careful study of the colored residents shows them to be excellent lynch fodder. Their reticence and intolerable docility in the presence of even the poorest of white trash makes me wonder why lynching is not indulged in more by the farmers just for the sport of the thing.

The Elkton trial was interesting from many angles. With the whites up bright and early Tuesday morning, anxious to get a glimpse of, and their calloused paws on, Davis, who was accused of attempted rape, it was noticeable that not one dusky countenance appeared in the vicinity of the court house. When it was finally noised around about noon that the hoodlums would hardly start trouble with a batch of Baltimore patrolmen in command, they began to creep from their hiding places with a nervous sniffing sound like a mouse smelling for a cat.

Not one dared to enter the court house square, but lined up mutely along side of a garage at a safe distance from the scene of activities, and there they stood wild-eyed and sheepish as though a white man had but to say "shoo" and they would scurry to their hiding places.

When, in company with another reporter, I approached the doors of the court house, they seemed to marvel at my audacity. To see a colored person mount the sacred stairs seemed nothing short of madness.

The belief seemed prevalent that the mysteries of a court of justice are reserved only for whites and that the only occasion that the darker brother had to function within its mystic portals was on the wrong side of the bar. The idea of a colored juror, a colored bailiff, a colored attorney, is so remote from their untutored conception of things that the mention of such a possibility would only be greeted as fantastical imaginings.

To the average colored man on the Eastern Shore, there are but two types of people—white folks who make the world go round and colored folks who get behind and push. Their environment for the past one hundred or more years has been such that they can conceive of themselves only as farm hands, day laborers and oyster tongers and shuckers.

The teachers and ministers who go into the section as missionaries have done little to alleviate this situation. The very atmosphere of the place is so thoroughly saturated with the ideas of race inferiority that people who should know better find themselves stricken with this loathsome disease.

Besides malaria, strawberry itch and rabbit fever, a sojourn on the Eastern Shore is likely to result in a severe attack of uncletomitis that renders the victim practically spineless for the rest of his natural life.

It takes from six months to a year for the germs to get established in the system, but once there, no cure is known. Without this ailment, however, it is impossible to live on the Peninsular.

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THEY ARE ALL AFRAID.

At the Davis trial I was especially impressed with the completeness with which the colored sojourners on the Shore have given themselves over to fright. Each witness gave as the only excuse for his actions the one explanation: "I was scared." The white folks seemed to accept this as perfectly logical.

A "scared" man is easily licked and as easily lynched. Small boys will have great sport tying a tin can to the tail of a slinking hound who runs and yelps every time a bunch of young hoodlums loom in sight, but in the case of a bulldog who dares to show his teeth, it is an entirely different story. It's the boys who take to their heels.

The Davis trial was interesting from another angle. The whole demeanor of the court seemed to emphasize the fact that it realized that the Shore was on trial before the rest of the state and the world. It wanted to justify itself before the eyes of civilization.

Assuming that the facts as presented on the stand were reasonably exact, in spite of the fact that the two persons directly concerned were not brought into open court, a fairly clear cut case of attempted rape was brought out, and surely enough to inflict the death penalty had the ire of the court been sufficiently aroused by the agitation of what the Shoremen called "them damned Reds." The colored witnesses, I regret to report, if they contributed anything, it was even more damaging.

The defense attempted to prove by them that the accused was under the influence of liquor, but the poor simple minded fellows did not get the idea at all. They thought that they were themselves being tried for violating the prohibition law and denied the liquor drinking issue most vehemently.

Personally I have little faith in the redemption of the Eastern Shore in this generation. What little faith I had in the power of our good Dr. T. H. Kiah, principal of Princess Anne Academy, to mold a semblance of manhood in the youth of the Shore, has been shaken. Even he has become an incurable sufferer with the inferiority disease.

There seems to be nothing left but to follow the advice of H. L. Mencken and allow the Eastern Shore populace to stew in its own juices.